DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 317 920 CG 022 438

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TITLE Media Counseling: The New Frontier for Professional Outreach.
PUB DATE May 89
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, May 22-27, 1989).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Counseling Techniques; Counselors; *Mass Media Role; *Mass Media Use; *Outreach Programs; Psychologists; Radio

ABSTRACT

The growth of media counseling or psychology has been at times spectacular and at times sporadic. People are taking the phenomenon of media counseling seriously. The potential of radio to reach large audiences is overwhelming. There is an opportunity in the 1990s to allow top professionals in every field to reach the public directly with positive messages. There will never be enough mental health professionals to allow one-to-one counseling to be a major source of information to people seeking assistance. Members of the public can ask intelligent questions and can provide additional information through personal experience, regardless of the mental health issues under discussion. The difficulties with media counseling include the fact that very few mental health professionals have any knowledge of media complexities and difficulties. Media counseling has the potential for research. Media counselors should see their roles as educators. They should neither advise major life or lifestyle changes on air nor accept personal referrals, and they should promote the profession. Media counseling will not flourish if psychologists and psychiatrists attempt to solve every problem before embarking on experimental ventures. (ABL)

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Media Counseling: The New Frontier for Professional Outreach

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ABSTRACT

In 1982 the program "That's Living" was first aired on 930 CJCA in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. CJCA is a popular AM station in Northern Albera.

The first two authors are still co-hosts of this popular "media psychology" approach to problem solving. While the third author, psychiatrist Dr. Carl Blashko, was a co-host for the first three formative years of the program. "That's Living" has been nominated twice and named once as the outstanding public affairs radio program in Canada.

In this article the authors have utilized the help of a developmental psychologist (Dr. Leonard Stewin) to provide a framework for the kinds of strategies that they use in sending messages to the public and helping people both with problems and with referral questions. This article was first presented at the biennial conference of the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, May, 1989.

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Media Counseling: The New Frontier for Professional Outreach

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This article is in large part based on presentations made at the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association convention, May, 1989, in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The presenters are the authors of this paper and included Dr. Len Stewin from the Department of Educational Psychology, University of Alberta. Dr. Stewin presented a theoretical framework for the development of media counseling in North America. A second panelist was Dr. Carl Blashko, an Edmonton psychiatrist and former co-host of the radio program, 930 CJCA's "That's Living". Both Dr. Henry Janzen and Dr. John Paterson currently host this local radio program as well as appearing frequently as guests on television both locally and nationally. Drs. Janzen and Paterson are employed with the Clinical Services Division, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta.

INTRODUCTION

The growth of media counseling or media psychology has been at times spectacular in North America, at other times sporadic. When well known psychologists or psychiatrists talk directly to members of the public through radio or television, there is almost always a flurry of excitement and listener ratings confirm that people want interaction with mental health professionals. On the other hand, many of these shows have had a "firecracker type existence", they just have not captured the imagination of the public over time. A more common format, particularly in the United States is for popular television hosts to utilize

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psychologists and psychiatrists as guests. Most of these professionals who have appeared or been granted this type of exposure have become firm believers in the value of the education of people through the use of the media.

Media counseling has produced other benefits. In Finland, a bold experiment utilizing the advantages of television as an interactive medium was instituted (McAlister, 1977). In this experiment a number of TV programs were presented to volunteer viewing groups. The purpose was to help people stop smoking. Post program survey data indicated approximately 40,000 people participated in the project, at the end of six months, 25% or 10,000 of the participants were still non-smokers. In Finland the value of television is still being explored by these researchers as other forms of behavioral and psychological counseling are being investigated.

Radio shows have also expanded programming to include assistance with personal issues. The University of Miami, Florida has used the student radio station, WVUM, to develop a program to help students (Swibelman and Rayfield, 1982) acquire tips for: studying, building self-esteem and confidence, dealing with school stress, drug use and abuse, career decisions, loneliness, depression and male and female sex roles. After brief talks, listeners are invited to call in with questions and comments to which peer counselors respond. Psychiatrists like Dr. Harvey Ruben (1986) have also hosted radio talk shows. Ricks (1984) has also discussed the rise of interactive radio and its potential as a form of social support. Interactive radio can be

a method of reducing isolation and promoting community mental health. It gives listeners a chance to participate in networking and dialogue. Paterson and Blashko (1984/85) have also expounded upon the value of educationally oriented mental health programs and their potential for preventive health.

The very fact that there is now a division of media psychology in the American Psychological Association would attest to the fact that people are taking this new phenomenon very seriously. Unfortunately many of the discussions about media ethics have been framed in the context of literature written before any of these programs existed. In this paper the authors wished to talk about one radio program which has lasted over time and to suggest some of the reasons why this has occurred. Guidelines which have been developed by the host psychologist have also been presented.

There is little doubt that the potential of radio to reach large audiences is overwhelming. Grasha and Levi (1983) have discussed the positive aspects of the use of radio talk shows and they list the following benefits to listeners.

1. People acquire information regarding how they and others behave and some of the reasons why certain actions occur.
2. Listeners learn that other people have similar problems to theirs.
3. People get ideas for how to handle personal problems and to make better decisions.
4. Listeners are exposed to alternative points of view on topics that they thought were cut and dried.
5. People get to see that their personal points of view about behavior are sometimes consistent with those of professionals and their ideas are not silly or stupid.

6. Listeners learn that professionals are not perfect, they disagree with one another, and sometimes they have a sense of humor.

REACHING AN INFORMED PUBLIC

In 1955 Gordon Allport concluded it was unfortuate that most theories of human behavior were based on the antics of captive and desperate rats. In this statement he captured the thinking of the time which was that the hope for solutions for individual and group problems lay in the realm of science. It is true that the thinking of the 1950's is less than appropriate when we consider the impact of the media on human thinking and human behavior in the 1990's.

There is controversy with respect to the number of illiterate people in our modern society. Nevertheless most people would agree that our current citizenry is composed of the best educated and most well informed public in history. The same formulas that science applied are no longer appropriate. There are now in North America large numbers of educated people wanting to even further increase their educational opportunities. People now have access to many kinds of distance learning as well as more traditional courses and programs. The role of the media has become vitally important and what people say and hear significantly effects the way they behave, the way they vote, the way they look after themselves, the way they view issues.

Unfortunately while opportunites for education have increased, often delivery services by mental health professionals have not. Doctors, psychologists and counselors still rely on a large extent on one-to-one doctor patient interaction. In many

provinces and in states physicians are paid by health care plans to cure illness, while at the same time preventive work is not rewarded financially at all.

There is an opportunity in the 1990's to change our stance as professionals to allow top professionals in every field to reach the public directly with positive messages. Individuals do want to take control of their lives and are prepared to act on information that is provided to them. There will never be enough mental health professionals to allow one-to-one counseling to be a major source of information to people seeking assistance. Of course there will be problems and it is quite different for a psychologist to speak to 30,000 people on a radio program from discussion with one client in an office. Yet ethical guidelines can be developed in exactly the same fashion and the chances of the people responding to positive messages are greater when they can hear or see individuals personally, than when ideas are brought to them second or third hand through published articles.

It has been the experience of the authors that members of the public can ask intelligent questions and can provide additional information through personal experience, regardless of the mental health issues under discussion. If people are treated as if they are intelligent and as if they are capable of understanding, then many times they do comprehend issues under discussion.

The difficulties with media counseling include the fact that very few mental health professionals have any knowledge of media complexities and difficulties. It is very necessary if we are to

compete for viewers and listeners, then strategies learned from media experts must be employed. It is quite easy to avoid controversy by simply being dull. That way, few listeners will attend to any of the issues under discussion. Strategies including voice control, timing, humor, relevance, etc. are vital for hosts to reach target audiences. The authors of this article have made the assumption that the vast majority of listeners are informed, intelligent, able to react and participate with intelligent discussion. That assumption has been verified time and time again.

CJCA's That's Living

Much of the discussion and many of the biases in this article have been adapted from experiences with the radio program "That's Living". This program is aired on a local AM radio station, 930 CJCA, in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The program has been in operation every weekday Monday through Friday 2:00 to 3:30 p.m. since 1982. Drs. Janzen and Paterson currently serve as co-hosts of this program, individually hosting approximately 80% of the programs. Dr. Carl Blashko was a co-host of the program from 1983 through 1985. CJCA's "That's Living" was presented with a Canadian Gold Ribbon Award in 1985 and was designated by the Canadian Association of Broadcasters as the top public affairs radio program in Canada.

The co-hosts of this radio program have taken their responsibilities seriously. It will be seen in the bibliography that they have written extensively about their experiences. Further, they have presented findings at professional conferences

throughout the world. Fortunately, management at the radio station has encouraged the hosts and co-hosts to participate in community activities, to foster educational endeavors, plus supporting research projects to determine the effectiveness of media counseling.

The format of the radio show is quite simple. Each day the host prepares approximately five minutes of introduction on a mental health topic. Following this introduction members of the listening audience are encouraged to phone in and questions are answered, further problems are raised. Very often listeners will talk about issues not on topic, in fact, wide range in discussion is encouraged. Two popular books, the first a Canadian Best Seller, have been written by the talk show hosts utilizing popular topics as guidelines for discussion. According to recent Bureau of Broadcast Measurement ratings, the program reaches approximately 25-30,000 people during each 15 minute segment.

RESEARCH RESPONSIBILITIES

One of the areas frequently left out of discussion of media counseling is the potential for research. Several research projects have been fostered through the use of the program "That's Living" and these research developments are noted in the bibliography. The co-hosts usually try about twice a year to meet members of the public in some kind of an open forum. In many instances people are invited to fill out questionnaires so that some check is made of the validity of these experiences. Public lectures or seminars have been held on wide ranging topics such as smoking cessation, prevention of heart disease, adult

learning, stressors in modern society, marriage enrichment, problem solving, etc. In addition to the work sponsored directly by the talk show co-hosts literally dozens of other projects have been encouraged and volunteers requested through the listening audience available every afternoon.

One of the major differences between a talk show hosted by a media personality as opposed to a mental health professional, should be the quantity and quality of research that is promoted. It is vitally important if media counseling is to develop on a firm footing that research strategies take into account the uniqueness of the host/listener relationship. This relationship is just beginning to be understood. Early studies are very encouraging with respect to the potential of media counseling for positive personal change. (Bander, 1983; Borgeat, & Chaloult, 1985; Grasha & Levi, 1983; Janzen, Lang & Paterson, 1987; McAlister, Puska, Koskela, Pallonen & Maccoby, 1980; Paterson & Blashko, 1990; Paterson & Janzen, 1987; Paterson & Janzen, 1987; Paterson & Kovach, 1988; Morrison, 19 ; Phelan, 19 ; Zwibelman & Rayfield, 1982).

DO'S & DONT'S FOR MEDIA HOSTS

Like "Topsy", many of the strategies and ideas developed by the talk show hosts have just grown up. However guidelines developed through practice are often as or more valuable than guidelines set down from research and discussion. For the information of potential media counselors, here are some do's and dont's that have guided the professional work of the authors.

DO'S

What to do:

1. See your role as a host as one of an educator. Try to teach people both through the media and through spin off public lectures, other appearances, as well as writings, including books.

2. Promote the profession, be it psychology, medicine, psychiatry, social work, whatever. A professional media host should be an advocate and assist the public in gaining professional help.

3. Work to translate into every day language any research findings that are brought to the program either through the literature or by guest experts.

4. Take the role of "personality" seriously. Assume social responsibility so that availability to the public becomes a priority.

5. Continue to search for feedback by asking listeners to call back. When making referrals or suggesting agencies that might help, check to find out if these sources have indeed been helpful.

6. Work to create an atmosphere of problem expectation, sharable problems and problem solving strategies. By incorporating listeners as participants and problem solvers, very often the isolation of owning a problem can be diffused.

7. Motivate people to seek help from a variety of resource inventories, thus helping to remove any stigma that might still remain attached to problems in the mental health area.

8. Recognize restrictions of time and be a good listener. Empathy and caring come across the media the same as in one's office. Truly try to listen to people.

9. Monitor work on air the same as in a private office or clinic. Practice review is vital, so medical registrars, psychological registrars should be encouraged to analyze our work and become involved through this opportunity to reach the public.

10. Set guidelines through discussion with other professionals and references to codes of ethics. Guidelines for professional talk shows must be somewhat different than entertainment guidelines for other radio programs. Acknowledge limitations on and off air. When people correct errors, welcome the assistance.

11. Make yourself personally available, free of charge where we have crisis situations. The hosts on That's Living have had suicide calls, while these are not a large part of the work of a radio psychologist, as with any professional, emergencies must take precedents.

12. Phrase comments and discussion to reflect personal understanding of research and always identify when talking of personal experience or bias. Personal experience is a good strategy to discuss on air, as people will relate to professionals that they know, much better than they refer to experts.

13. Followup radio work when given opportunities and become available to mental health groups, public at large, selected workshops.

DONT'S

What not to do.

1. Never advise major life or lifestyle changes on air.

2. Don't accept personal referrals through radio exposure. It is vitally important that the mental health professional avoid dual roles and conflict of interest.

3. While entertainment value may determine listenership, it should not be a guiding principle for a professional problem solving program. Avoid temptations to entertain, people are interested in problem solving by itself, without trappings.

4. Enlist the cooperation of the station outlet to put all calls forward rather than screening them. It is recognized that there are limitations here as some frequent callers can spoil programs. Nevertheless calls should not be screened for entertainment value.

5. Do not endorse particular products or read commercials.

6. Repeat over and over that one person cannot speak for the entire profession of psychology or any other related discipline.

7. Do worry about broadcast ratings, but worry because of professional and discipline image, not in the competitive sense of changing to improve listenership.

CHARTING OUR FUTURE

Media counseling will not flourish if psychologists and psychiatrists attempt to solve every problem before embarking on experimental ventures. The authors have found members of the

public to be most understanding and media counseling becomes a partnership between host and listener. We are learning how to interact and the same strategies with respect to educating and caring apply on the radio, on television and in ones private office. The authors encourage listeners (at professional conferences) and readers of this article to keep in touch with us. We've now been 8 years at this endeavor and we are still very enthusiastic.

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